

A photograph of a road at night, viewed from a low angle. The sky is a deep, vibrant red, suggesting a sunset or a fire in the distance. The road is dark, with a white line on the left and a yellow line on the right. A car is visible in the distance on the road. The trees are silhouetted against the red sky, creating a dramatic and somewhat ominous atmosphere.

Slow Burn

Civility and the White Community

Eugene, OR
Summer 2023

The following piece is a transcript of a talk given at the Landing Strip in Minneapolis, Minnesota on June 16th, 2023. It details the brief opening of a window of revolt in Eugene, it's swift co-optation, and demise, and offers insights and lessons to help insurgents achieve longer, deeper, and more lasting ruptures.

Together towards the Party of Disorder!

Introduction

On May 29th, 2020, a small and rowdy group ignited a rebellion in Eugene not seen since the famous days that preceded the Green Scare. The events of that night have been recounted in the piece *On an Uprising and Its Deferral*, which is available here tonight, but I'll briefly go over them again for those unaware of what took place: A small crowd gathered downtown in response to a call for a protest in solidarity with the nationwide uprising that was unfolding over the death of George Floyd, and which Minneapolis was its epicenter. The night before, we had all watched the Third Precinct righteously burn after days of siege, and some took it upon themselves to take the streets in solidarity. What transpired took us by surprise.

At the beginning of the protest, the crowd that gathered was relatively small, barely enough to fill one of the downtown streets. Though clearly unsure of how to move together, it was apparent to some of us that the composition and intentions of the crowd were not the same as the stale, and often NGO-led rallies and protests that we had grown accustomed to. Though it may have gone against conventional wisdom to wait for larger numbers before going on the attack, members of the crowd began tagging walls and businesses almost immediately. News-boxes, and other items meant to slow down following police cruisers were dragged into the street. While this may seem like a fairly mild escalation relative to what happened here in Minneapolis, or other parts of the country that night, this was the first time that many of us personally encountered this type of thing in Eugene, and comrades who had been around much longer said the

same. What was also different and refreshing was that no one in the crowd made any effort to police the actions of others. New tags and more barricades were met with cheers and encouragement.

After meandering through the downtown core for a while, the crowd grew sizably, roughly doubling in numbers. They turned Northward to a highway on-ramp near a busy skatepark. Collective ambition led the bulk of the crowd to go onto the on-ramp to try to initiate a blockade. Waiting a few hundred feet in front of them were two Eugene police cruisers who's officers stepped out to order the crowd to move back. Debris was thrown at them before the police attempted to deploy pepper spray, however their cans were either not pressurized or they did not know how to use them, and the mace came out in a sad stream of only a few feet, not impacting any of its intended targets. Almost immediately, all of the windows of their cruisers were smashed, and the frantic officers rushed inside of them and sped off. The EPD was not to be seen the rest of the night. In much the same way as a witness to the beginning of the Oscar Grant rebellion recounts the initial smashing of Oakland Police cruisers by youth in the piece, *You Can't Shoot Us All*, this is a moment that I consider to be special in Eugene's history.

The crowd exited the on-ramp, deciding not to attempt to blockade the highway, and settled at an intersection just by the entrance where a couple of strip malls were. A dumpster was rolled into the street, and set on fire, creating a beacon which signaled to others: "The riot is here, come and join us." Throughout the night, the intersection became flooded with hundreds of people of all types. There were, of course, your standard militants and activists - the same people that you see at a protest regularly, but far outnumbering them were a hodgepodge of characters cutting across social categories.

These were people who had, by and large, not previously been connected with by the web of political organizations and institutions in Eugene and therefore were not brought together with the typical frameworks or baggage that we usually see. As such, possibilities were opened that we had never seen before: many people came to participate in looting, to drag whatever they could carry or get loose into the ever-growing fire, or simply to hang out and revel in the moment. This lack of organized political leadership also made it impossible for any one

formation or organized group (of which there were a few) to have sway over the crowd as a whole, and so calls for deescalation (like, to stop breaking into stores and looting) were ignored.

The riot lasted until around 2:00 AM when the Eugene Police had gathered enough numbers to teargas the intersection, and the crowd dispersed. There were no arrests made that night.

This was a truly empowering and inspiring night for many of us in Eugene, and has played a major part in shaping our approach to our political efforts ever since. However, today I am here to talk to you about how the riot in Eugene was quickly denounced, condemned, and delegitimized, by a coalition of Activists, the Eugene Progressives, NGO's, City Leaders, and the Police. I am here to tell you how such an inspiring and powerful moment would be still-born in its potential to blossom towards a rebellion like we saw across much of the country that weekend. I will talk about rhetorical maneuvers that were immediately deployed in the riot's aftermath, why those were effective in our context, and what this rhetoric signals from those who push it.

The Restoration of Order

The fires of the night before gave way the next day to a downpour: a literal one. Charming Pacific Northwest rain which soaks everything, and does not stop for the entire day. In this situation, it's difficult, but not impossible, to get people to attend things which are scheduled outdoors. This was certainly a factor in the riot not playing out through the weekend, following the rhythm of the rest of the country. But even more effective than the rain was the deluge of outrage, disavowal, and condemnation, that came in the form of official press releases, posts on Facebook, and messages posted to large Signal loops. If you had been privy to the discourse that day, you would have been met with long dissertations from self described radicals about how the looting of the strip malls was in fact racist because there were black people present who had been filmed telling (assumed) white people to stop smashing windows to gain entrance. The video clip of this incident was famously seized on by Far-Right blogger Andy Ngo. You may have also heard about how the riot, with its alleged overwhelming white participation (hardly a surprise given that Eugene registers as 86% white on the Census) was not centering black voices. Which ones? We can not be sure, but we might assume correctly.

Meanwhile, chatter swirled amongst some of Eugene's so-called radicals who either refused to endorse the riot or outright condemned it. "I have mixed feelings" became the slogan of those who were caught wholly unprepared for revolt but had the sense not to express their discomfort.

These rhetorical attacks had the effect of identifying anyone who had participated in the riot (specifically the looting) as being racist and a participant themselves in white supremacy. That rather than actively fighting back against White Supremacy, they were instead affirming the very thing that had led to the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis. This was, of course, argued against by some who could see that this was ludicrous but there were not enough voices, or those with much influence, who could turn the tide on the conversation. It is often a disappointment, and was back then, that many white comrades are simply not ready or comfortable with putting their reputation on the line in an open and fast-moving setting when potentially being called racist is at stake. The truth is that If we don't have the voices that know better to speak up, then we can't win these debates in the popular discourse.

The spontaneous and insurrectionary energy of the night before had successfully been rendered marginal before the day was over, and the City of Eugene and its political class wasted no time in imposing a curfew, and organizing a mass march to nowhere the next day (with over 10,000 present) to affirm its primary constituency and set a sterile standard for how the rest of the summer would go. Though thousands met in the street that day, there was a clear heaviness and suspicion present amongst the march-goers, and nothing worth mentioning happened on the primary march, though a few hundreds did attempt to meet after dispersal but were quickly routed by the Eugene police. Order restored.

Eugene and its Constituency

I have read an account of what happened here in Minneapolis to turn the rebellion into a mass-activity of self-policing which spelled its demise. I felt it was important to share the story of Eugene here because of the similarities in rhetorical attacks, so that we can affirm each other in our experiences, and develop collective strategies to get ahead of this the next time.

To understand how these attacks worked and were successful in reimposing order, I want to spend a little bit of time describing Eugene, and its context. After that, I will describe its political composition. What follows will by no means be an exhaustive account of forces in Eugene, just those I feel were particularly relevant to the neutralization of the rebellion.

Eugene, is an idyllic forest city located at the Southern end of Oregon's picturesque Willamette Valley. It is nestled amidst stunning natural surroundings. Stretching for 100 miles, the valley forms a corridor in the Northwest region of the state, flanked by the Pacific Coast to the West and the imposing Cascade mountain range to the East, home to some of the tallest peaks in the Continental US. Housing three-quarters of the state's population, the valley's North meets the border with Washington, where the city of Portland is located. However, due to its dense population in comparison to the rest of Oregon and the unique physical geography of the state, the Willamette Valley finds itself both geographically and politically isolated from the predominantly conservative and economically disadvantaged areas

beyond its boundaries. This divide has given rise to tensions, leading to a movement known as “The Greater Idaho Movement,” which seeks to establish non-binding referendums in the counties outside the valley, aiming to join the neighboring state of Idaho. Nested in this movement, we have the all-too-familiar divide between poor, conservative rural areas, and “Coastal Elites.” This dynamic plays out locally between liberal Eugene, and its close, conservative neighbors, like Springfield, Veneta, and Junction City.

Eugene is somewhere between a college town, a Hippie Mecca, and a destination city for well-to-do progressives who would prefer to live somewhere “clean,” picturesque, and orderly. The people in this class are often the leaders and best paid employees of its constellation of civic organizations, institutions, and NGO’s. Within Eugene’s social fabric, this influential cohort operates with a level of implicit acceptance, their contributions to the public sphere garnering them respect and authority. However, the prevalence of their wealth and influence often remains unspoken, rarely subjected to scrutiny, let alone challenges.

Embedded within the self-image of Eugene is the notion that it was once, and to some extent still is (through tired reenactment), a revered hub of the Hippie Movement, once frequented by the legendary counter-cultural figure and author, Ken Kesey. This historical association plays a significant role in shaping the city’s collective identity, fostering a belief that this bygone era bestows upon Eugene an inherent openness and acceptance of alternative ways of life. However, the reality today, if it ever truly reflected this spirit, is that such sentiments now predominantly reside in the realm of nostalgia, witnessed only in the aging remnants of the hippie community and the occasional marathon drum solos during local Jam Band performances. Furthermore, it is not uncommon for there to be a crossover between the older hippie demographic and the affluent progressive class in Eugene. It is even less rare to find individuals from either of these groups serving as your landlord, having acquired housing inventory years ago when prices were relatively low, or having invested in properties upon their recent arrival. This convergence of the aging counterculture and the moneyed elite exemplifies the intricate social fabric of Eugene, where economic and cultural influences intertwine in ways that reinforce the city’s self-perception.

Finally, there exists a large, well funded, and active left-wing base made up of activists tackling a litany of issues, NGO workers, elected officials (and aspirational elects), and other self-described “community organizations”. They each come with their overlapping bases of supporters who they can call on, to come to this or that demonstration, for funding, or to listen to and hopefully adopt their positions on whatever issue. They run the spectrum from merely identifying as liberals, to some self-identifying as socialist, or even anarchist adjacent. When in discussion with someone steeped with investment in this collage of formations, the word “community” is often invoked to mean themselves, and the others belonging to this social environment. Their horizons are often limited to vague references to a future resembling a libertarian version of the currently existing society: free schools, union jobs, democracy, community defense, and transformative justice to enforce their order.

Movements cannot escape the context of their environment, and here it is no different. The rhetoric employed by these groups often falls short of inspiring and, at times, can even have detrimental effects, as witnessed after May 29th. The actions of the Left Activists as a whole tend to follow a predictable script of discoursing with power through symbolic protest while expecting passivity from their followers. For instance, a typical environmental action in Eugene may gather a hundred people at the headquarters of a local natural gas company, opposed by a tepid environmental coalition. While a banner is unfurled, smoke bombs may be ignited, and a prepared statement is shared over a megaphone. Hi-Definition photos are taken, and a press release is shared to social media. Wash, Rinse, Repeat.

These actions ultimately lack inspiration and yield limited results. Nevertheless, it is crucial not to disregard their significance or underestimate their broader impact, as they contribute to making Eugene a fertile ground for activist managers to be trained and replicated, as well as setting a standard for protest and action in the popular mind of the city. Notably, funding, and in some cases Leadership, for many of these organizations comes from the Progressive Liberal class in town.

These three key demographics, the Progressive Liberal Class, Hippie Remnants, and the Left Activists, though not an exhaustive list of the composition of forces in Eugene, together serve as the civic

foundation of the city which makes White Peace from the left possible. This is who the City refers to when they speak of “Our Constituency.” Far from forming the basis of a movement-in-common towards liberation, it instead manifests itself in a white orderliness from the Left. One that is not too disruptive, which is well mannered, tolerant, and which believes in Civic Engagement.

If I can give you a visual of this particular brand of white order that reigns in Eugene, imagine a well tended garden in someone’s front yard with an “Everyone is Welcome Here” sign and a Ring Camera surveilling the street. This epitomizes the outward appearance of inclusivity while preserving an antagonism towards the criminal class.

White Order does not materialize out of thin air; it requires active self-identification from its participants who feel a personal stake in upholding it. While the more extreme expressions of this mobilization may involve lynch mobs or vigilante actions, the liberal manifestations often take the form of model citizens, “good neighbors,” or “good community members.” Eugene has no shortage of individuals fitting into these latter categories.

Conclusion

By looking at Eugene from this angle, as being held together by a class and cultural alliance fundamentally opposed to criminality and disorder, one can better understand the intense fear and swift denunciations that followed the events of May 29th. The condemnations, particularly directed at the rioting and looting, serve as a reaffirmation of White Order, as they defend the core property relations that underpin it. While white progressivism often portrays itself as an ally to marginalized groups fighting for liberation, it will not accept its own members joining the revolutionaries. To stand in solidarity with a multi-racial insurrection and cross over into the realm of criminality is, in essence, an abandonment of Whiteness.

Furthermore, the rioters posed a threat to the self-image that the people of Eugene use to absolve themselves of complicity in the perpetuation of racism and white supremacy. This self-image portrays them as exceptional individuals who have collectively achieved a social peace that supposedly excludes such issues. “Eugene has nothing to do with what’s happening in (insert city)!” was a constant refrain heard after a rowdy demonstration that Summer.

Whiteness, marked by its tendency to shy away from conflict as a reflection of its guilty conscience, could not easily reconcile with the exposure of a different reality and disposition brought forth by the rioters. This alternate conception of reality, is fundamentally incompatible with Eugene’s notion of White Peace.

Lastly I will add that cowardice is a part of it too. Simply put, there are people, self described progressives and radicals who espouse anti-racism, but who will not put their money where their mouth is, and are afraid of escalation. Fear is an understandable emotion to widespread upheaval and fluid situations, but I stress that this is no excuse to condemn those who take matters into their own hands.

What became clear in the aftermath of the May 29th rebellion in Eugene, is that these denunciations rooted in the idea that participating in a rebellion is somehow racist were effective and will surely remain a tactic of those in the future looking to restore order. On our part, it is important to strategize around ways to undermine this tactic ahead of time.

Let me be clear, an anarchism worth its name will not be involved in efforts to impose order on the world around us. We are not in the business of denouncing rebellion, but escalating it and making the rupture deeper the next time around. Furthermore, our anarchism aims to bring forth the blossoming of as many forms-of-life as can be thought of, building an ecstatic presence in the world again, and rested on a commitment to a common future with that which lives around us. This is not something that can be spoken to by existing political frameworks, besides our own.

Talks like this are important to share our experience, name what happened, and gather insights. Our post-2020 project in Eugene has been to push our own narratives that affirm disorderliness, insurrection, and aim for rupture. This has achieved us good results, but we are still working to connect as much as we can with people who share our perspectives. We believe that it is by connecting ahead of time, and forming a viable force with our own history, experience, and orientation, that we can outmaneuver more civil formations on the street the next time that unrest breaks out.

Here is to hoping that next time, there is a night two.

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